

THE GUARDIAN

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AMERICAN FORCES PRESS SERVICE **NEWS ARTICLES**

Company Works to Flush Out Taliban During 'Rock Avalanche'

By Sgt. 1st Class Jacob Caldwell, USA
Special to American Forces Press Service

KUNAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan, Oct. 31, 2007 – Under the cover of darkness, soldiers from Company A, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), air-assaulted about three miles south of their forward operating bases in the Pech River Valley earlier this month as part of Operation Rock Avalanche.



Army Sgt. Chad Mohr (left) watches rounds land on target as Army Spc. David Hooker fires the MK19 machine gun at a known insurgent position Oct. 24, 2007, during Operation Rock Avalanche. The "Dragon Platoon" soldiers of Destined Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), were occupying a ridgeline between the Pech and Shuryak river valleys in Afghanistan's Kunar province. U.S. Army photo



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Suite 101

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Operation Rock Avalanche was a multiple-company mission that ran Oct. 19-25 in the Chapa Dara, Korengal, Shuryak and Pech river valleys. Participating were "Able," "Battle" and "Chosen" companies from 2nd Battalion; Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (Airborne); and multiple companies from the Afghan National Army's 201st Corps. The companies were positioned into different areas of Kunar province at different times, hoping to flush insurgents out of one area into another, where U.S. and Afghan forces would be waiting for them.

Working from a vantage point 7,500 feet up, overlooking the Shuryak and Pech valleys, Able Company's four-day mission was to locate and destroy insurgent command-and-control and logistical elements operating in that area, Army Capt. Louis Frketic, the company's commander, said.

After setting up a perimeter and establishing a command post on the top of Phase Line Ridgeway, 2nd Platoon was dispatched to the nearby village of Aybot.



Paratroopers from Able Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne) move to a new position along their established perimeter Oct. 23, 2007, on a ridgeline between the Pech and Shuryak river valleys in Afghanistan during Operation Rock Avalanche. U.S. Army photo

Previous intelligence had suggested that Taliban leaders might be holed up in that area.

"We were looking for two named (high-value targets). One of them is the commander of the entire Shuryak forces, and the other guy is an IED specialist," Frketic said. "We searched their compounds, and they were not in there or in the area."

Frketic and his paratroopers were not dissuaded. A low-level voice-intercept team from Company B, 173rd Special Troops Battalion (Airborne), was tasked to Able Company for the mission. The team had begun listening to Taliban radio traffic as soon as they hit the ground and already were getting "a bead" on insurgents operating in the surrounding valleys.

The team was an invaluable asset, one that Frketic said he uses every

chance he gets to collect intelligence on the enemy.

"A lot of times we will start getting locations, and then we will pick up names," he said. "It is usually specific to that cell what kind of things they are talking about. Sometimes they will start talking about people, fighters, locations, ammo, or weapons systems that they have."

Even the smallest details, including specific words used, can yield valuable information, Frketic said.

"A couple days ago, right before the mission started, we heard a cell talking about their fighters and their leaders in the terms of soldiers and officers. Other times, we'll hear them talk about fighters and commanders. The one talking about officers and soldiers, that is a professional organization. Little details like that are very critical in my mind," he explained.

With so much Afghan National Army and U.S. military activity on the surrounding mountains and in the surrounding valleys, the Taliban were never sure of Able Company's position and never mounted an attack on the company. The voice intercept team used the time to continue to collect intelligence on enemy

The Guardian is published monthly by Dennis Blessing, Service Officer of the Madera County Veterans Service Office. It is freely issued, via email, to all Madera Veterans and Service Organizations.

The primary purpose of this publication is to provide County Veterans with a timely news source; effectively informing veterans of VA up-dates and other pertinent information. Hopefully, it will also serve as an inter-group vehicle, announcing important activities and information offered by other local service organizations.

Your comments and suggestions are always welcomed.

Dennis Blessing, Publisher

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(Left to right) Army Spc. Cody Martin, Army Staff Sgt. Brandon Thomas and Army Sgt. Steven Martin launch an 81 mm round from an M252 mortar Oct. 24, 2007, during Operation Rock Avalanche in Afghanistan. The mortar team from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), was targeting known insurgent positions in the Pech Valley during the operation.

(Left to right) Army Sgt. Steven Martin, Army Spc. Cody Martin and Army Staff Sgt. Brandon Thomas launch an 81 mm round from a M252 mortar Oct. 24, 2007, during Operation Rock Avalanche in Afghanistan. The mortar team from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), was targeting known insurgent positions in the Pech Valley during the operation. U.S. Army photo



locations were now known.

Around noon Oct. 24, Frketic put that information to use and launched soldiers from 1st Platoon, Company D, into action. The platoon is a heavy-weapons platoon attached to Able Company for the deployment and commonly referred to as the Dragon Platoon. They had air-assaulted onto the ridgeline with their MK19 grenade launchers and M2 machine guns. A mortar team with an 81 mm tube from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2-503rd, also was put into action.

Their fire destroyed one command-and-control node operating in the Shuryak Valley. But destroying the enemy position was probably the easiest part of the mission for the MK19 gun team, said Spc. David Hooker, from Palestine, Ark., and a Dragon Platoon member.

"I've never air-assaulted in with a MK19 before," Hooker said. "But since we just set in and manned a blocking position, it was OK.

"The weight is the biggest challenge, getting it in and out," he said.

An MK19 without a tripod weighs 75 pounds, and ammo cans weigh between 40 and 60 pounds each, depending on the number of rounds in them. Many cans were brought for this mission.

The mortar team, one of the busiest in the battalion, also spent most of the day putting rounds on target. The team averages firing more than 1,000 rounds per month. "As far as firing goes, this is hands-down the most intense deployment that I have been on," said Army Staff Sgt. Brandon Thomas, of Nashville, Tenn.

While Howitzers are available for fire missions throughout Kunar province, the mortar teams are able to react the quickest when indirect fire is needed, Thomas said.

"We have eyes on a lot of the targets, and our response is a little bit quicker," he said. "The channels to clear the 155 go all the way through battalion and then back through their fires. Ours are cleared right here. If we are in direct contact, I can engage freely."



Army Capt. Louis Frketic (center), Able Company commander, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), and Army Staff Sgt. James Green (right), a low-level voice intercept team leader assigned to Bravo Company, 173rd Special Troops Battalion (Airborne), discuss intelligence gathered by the team Oct. 24, 2007, in the Pech and Shuryak river valleys in Afghanistan's Kunar province. U.S. Army photo

"The guys that come here right out of basic or other units usually get broke down pretty quick or get into it pretty quick depending on what their physical fitness level was before," he said.

All of the gear these paratroopers carry is heavy: helmet, protective vests, rucksacks, weapons, ammunition, and water. It makes packing before the mission extremely important, leaving little room for extra cold-weather gear or even extra food.

During the trip down the mountain, the Able Company soldiers had hoped to "drop in" on some insurgents the low-level voice intercept team had confirmed were hiding out in villages in that area. But none were spotted, and no contact was made.

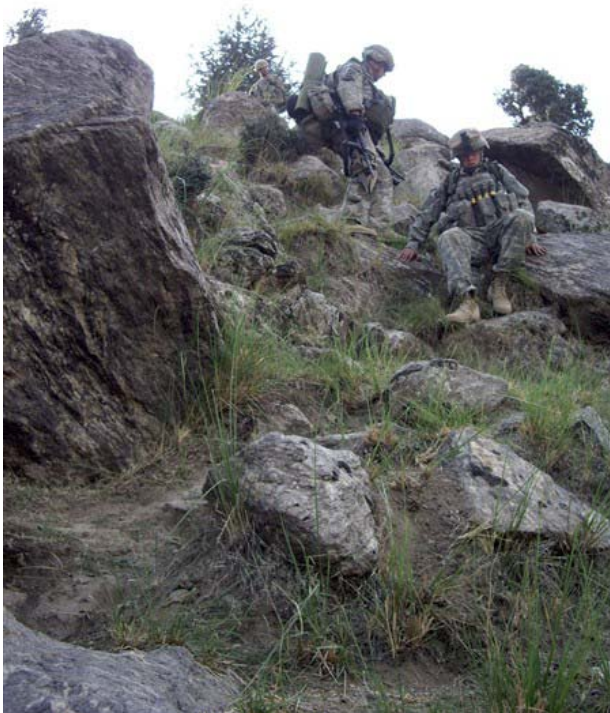
Frketic stressed that wasn't a problem.

"Those villages are only a three-to four-hour walk from our base," he said. "They'll be getting visits from us again soon."

cover, and they stand out there and fire throughout the entire engagement and also in support after," Thomas said. "It's pretty remarkable what they do."

Early on the morning of Oct. 25, members of Able Company began what would end up as a 10-hour trek down treacherous, slippery and steep terrain back to their base -- no small feat for even the most fit paratrooper, yet a regular occurrence for soldiers in Kunar province.

"We go on ruck marches into the mountains every other day or every third day," said Staff Sgt. Brian Mading, from Bonita Springs, Fla., and a member of Headquarters Platoon. "The first couple are tough. Then, of course, the more you are doing it, the more you get built up."



Army Staff Sgt. Brian Mading (center), Able Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), helps another soldier down the mountain Oct. 25, 2007, during a ruck-march back into the Pech Valley in Afghanistan's Kunar province. The soldiers of Able Company marched down from an elevation of more than 7,500 feet back to their forward operating base. The trek took more than 10 hours to cover three miles because of the steep and slippery terrain. U.S. Army photo

President Announces

Nomination of Lt.

Gen. James Peake, MD, as next SecVA

Dr. James Peake

Chief Medical Director and Chief Operating Officer
QTC Management, Inc.

Dr. James Peake, Lieutenant General, United States Army Medical Corps (Retired), brings to his position a wealth of experience in the uniformed and private sectors. He is a 1966 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and began his career as an infantry officer. Dr. Peake worked his way through many important positions. He is a highly decorated Vietnam veteran where served as platoon leader with the 101st Airborne Division. After Vietnam, he attended Cornell University Medical College and became board certified in general and thoracic surgery. His military and medical career earned his nomination by President George W. Bush to serve as the 40th Surgeon General of the Army and Commander, United States Medical Command. He served in this position from 2000 to 2004. More recently, General Peake was Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Project Hope, a non-profit international health foundation with offices and programs in more than 30 different countries on five continents. Dr. Peake is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, the American College of Cardiology, and member of the Society of Thoracic Surgeons. He has been honored with the order of Military Medical Merit; the "A" Professional Designator; and the Medallion, Surgeon General of the United States.

His experience on active duty includes military/civilian humanitarian operations in responding to the Miami / Dade County impact area of Hurricane Andrew as the commander of the 44th Medical Brigade and Surgeon to the Joint Task Force Commander. While at Project HOPE he helped to orchestrate the use of civilian volunteers aboard the Navy Hospital Ship Mercy as it responded to the Tsunami disaster in Indonesia and also as part of the Hurricane Katrina response aboard the Hospital Ship Comfort.

TriWest's \$500,000 Contribution Helps California Kids Cope with Deployment

PHOENIX (June 25, 2007) — Separated from parents who are defending the nation, the children of military families are also serving America. The separation, fear of losing a parent, and the nagging sense of uncertainty can put a heavy psychological burden on children.

Some 100 military children from Northern California are attending the Purple Camp, June 20th – 26th at Camp Mendocino 160 miles north of San Francisco, made possible in part by a \$500,000 contribution from Phoenix-based TriWest Healthcare Alliance to the National Military Family Association (NMFA).

“Military kids are learning how to cope with feelings of fear and uncertainty by participating in Operation Purple Camp where staff teaches the skills they need, mixed with a memorable week of the excitement and adventure,” said David J. McIntyre Jr., TriWest President and CEO.

“I learned that ‘home sickness’ to them means missing their family more than it means missing a home because they’re used to moving from base to base, but they never get used to missing their parents,” said Deborah Jaynes, a Northern California, licensed marriage and family therapist who is working at Camp Mendocino. A second camp just wrapped up in San Juan Capistrano on June 22nd.

“The children meet at these summer camps and learn they are not alone in the way they feel,” said McIntyre. “They also learn from camp counselors how to express and deal with their anxieties. Plus, they have a lot of well-deserved fun.”

As part of their ongoing commitment to provide a complete continuum of care for America’s military families, TriWest is proud to be a primary sponsor of the Operation Purple Camps in California.

There are, says NMFA, 220,000 children who have a parent absent, and 3,500 of them ages 7 to 18 will participate in one of 34 Purple Camps held in 26 states this summer.

About TriWest Healthcare Alliance

TriWest Healthcare Alliance partners with the Department of Defense to do "Whatever It Takes" to support the health care needs of 2.9 million members of America's military family. A Phoenix-based corporation, TriWest provides access to cost-effective, high-quality health care in the 21-state TRICARE West Region. TriWest is a proud Corporate Team Member of America Supports You. Visit www.triwest.com for more information.

About NMFA

The National Military Family Association is the only national organization whose sole focus is the military family and whose goal is to influence the development and implementation of policies that will improve the lives of the families of the seven uniformed services. For more than 35 years, its staff and volunteers, comprised mostly of military family members, have built a reputation for being the leading experts on military family issues.

TRICARE beneficiaries can save money two ways – with the new Dental Anesthesia Benefit, which TRICARE now covers, and Mail Order Pharmacy, which can save users of this service 66 percent of prescriptions per month.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Kristen

602-644-8496

TRICARE Dental Anesthesia Benefit

By Jenna Holtz

TriWest Healthcare Alliance

The TRICARE dental benefit now covers anesthesia and institutional costs for children age 5 and younger and beneficiaries with developmental, mental or physical disabilities. For these patients, it is medically or psychologically necessary to require general anesthesia for dental procedures.

Beneficiaries must have a preauthorization for a separate anesthesiology provider; dentists may not administer the anesthesia. This preauthorization is required in the same manner as required for adjunctive dental care.

Retroactive Reimbursements for TRICARE Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries who received care on or after October 17, 2006 through the implementation of the program on July 1, 2007 and believe they should be reimbursed according to the new guidelines may file DD Form 2642 (Beneficiary Claim Form) with copies of the provider's bill and receipt for payment of services.

To obtain DD Form 2642:

- Visit www.triwest.com>Beneficiary>Forms
 - Call 1-888-TRIWEST (874-9378) to have one mailed to you
- Visit your local TRICARE Service Center

Billing information must include all of the following:

- Specific name and address of the person who treated the patient
- Date and place of service
- Description of service furnished
- Charges for services

Diagnosis (If the diagnosis is not on the bill, complete block 8a on the DD Form 2642.)



Beneficiaries filing for reimbursement for services obtained from October 17, 2006 through July 1, 2007 are not required to have a preauthorization.

Mail completed forms to:

West Region Claims

P.O. Box 77028

Madison, WI 53707-7028

For information on TRICARE's dental programs:

- Active duty, activated Guard and Reserve and their families should contact United Concordia at www.tricaredentalprogram.com or 1-800-866-8499

Retirees and their families should contact Delta Dental at www.trdp.org or 1-888-838-8737

ADVISORY

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

California Department Of Veterans Affairs, California National Guard And County Veterans Service Officers To Sign Letter of Intent For Benefits Information

EVENT: The California Department of Veterans Affairs is pleased to announce a Signing Ceremony for a Letter of Intent to formalize a process for giving members of the California National Guard who have been mobilized during the War on Terror information on the services and benefits they have earned during their deployment

DATE: Thursday, September 6, 2007

TIME: 11:00 am

LOCATION: 9800 Goethe Road, Sacramento, CA 95827

WHO: **Secretary Tom Johnson, California Department of Veterans Affairs**
Major General William H. Wade II, Adjutant General, California National Guard
Tom Splitgerber, President, California Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Inc.

BACKGROUND: The purpose of the Letter of Intent is to define mutually agreed upon relationships between the California National Guard, the California Department of Veterans Affairs, and the California Association of County Veterans' Service Officers, Inc. The Letter of Intent will augment the ongoing, comprehensive efforts of these service providers to ensure military service members and their families are honored for their service to our country. The primary focus will be on the issues many military members face following their active duty military service and the provision of services they may be eligible to receive.

GROUP SURPRISES SOLDIER

Group Surprises Soldier With Keys to Jeep

By Samantha L. Quigley / American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON , Aug. 17, 2007 - Thousands of service members get care packages with surprises in them every day, thanks to caring folks back home. Some of the surprises, however, are bigger than others.

Operation Gratitude, a nonprofit troop-support group, celebrated the packing of its 250,000th care package by teaming with Tri-State Jeep Dealers Association to put Army Spc. Alfonso Sanchez in the driver's seat of a 2007 Jeep Patriot Limited.

"We were thrilled to give a Jeep Patriot to a true American patriot," said Carolyn Blashek, Operation Gratitude's founder. "It is an honor to be able to recognize him and, through him, all servicemembers in uniform."

Operation Gratitude is a supporter of America Supports You, a Defense Department program connecting citizens and corporations with military personnel and their families serving at home and abroad.

Sanchez, who received the package containing keys to the Jeep on July 24, is assigned to the 16th Military Police Brigade, which is serving in Iraq. He will receive the actual vehicle upon his redeployment to the states, hopefully by year's end, Blashek said.

Not expecting any packages, Sanchez didn't respond initially when his name was called.

"When they called my name, I was shocked, stunned, and I froze for a second, double-checking that my last name was Sanchez," he said. "The first thing I saw when I opened the box was a Jeep brochure, but they give those at the post exchange.

"I expected anything else but this vehicle," he said. "I don't have enough words, but with all my heart, thank you (Operation Gratitude) for all you do."

The package also contained a letter from Blashek explaining how her group was able to provide such a special "goodie" in their milestone package.

Sanchez won't be the only one who will receive a Jeep Patriot vehicle, however. Jeep, Major League Baseball's New York Mets, and a New York television station launched a letter-writing campaign July 15. Letters of support for the troops will be accepted until Sept. 17, 2007, when one lucky letter writer letter will be randomly chosen to receive a Jeep Patriot. That person's letter will then be sent to Sanchez, as well. The winner of the letter-writing campaign will be announced during a Sept. 30 pre-game ceremony at Shea Stadium in Queens, N.Y., Blashek said.

"We are proud and humbled to contribute to a great organization like Operation Gratitude that does so much good in support of our troops," Eric Neilsen, president of the New York Dealer Association, said. "The Jeep was originally developed to serve our military, and we are very pleased to be able to continue this tradition in a small way."

(Army Spc. Beatrice Florescu contributed to this report.)



Army Spc. Alfonso Sanchez, of 16th Military Police Brigade, thanks Army Maj. Kristian Sorensen, the brigade's civil affairs officer, July 24, 2007, for sending the names of the unit's soldiers to Operation Gratitude, a troop support group. Sanchez, who is currently serving in Iraq, received Operation Gratitude's 250,000th care package, which came with keys to a 2007 Jeep Patriot Limited. Defense Department photo by Army Spc. Beatrice Florescu

THE GUARDIAN

SERVING MADERA COUNTY VETERANS



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559-440-5132

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Ext. 6970

Telephone Advice Nurse (Fresno VA)**

Ext. 6933

Outpatient Clinic – Merced/Atwater (Castle)

209-381-0105

Service Representative: (DAV, Fresno VA)**

Ext. 5642

Service Representative: (VFW, Fresno VA)**

Ext. 5647

Service Representative: (AMVETS, Fresno VA)**

Ext. 5816

Service Representative: (American Legion,
Fresno VA)**

Ext. 5648

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